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SUBJECT: BELARUS: BLOGGERS REACT TO DIPLOMATIC CONFLICT

REF: VILNIUS 235

Summary

1. (SBU) Post has been monitoring the Belarusian public's reaction to the recent escalation in diplomatic tensions between the U.S. and the GOB. As the series of threatening public statements by the GOB culminated in the May 3 departure of eleven U.S. diplomats declared personae non gratae, there has been an outpouring of interest and heated debate within the internet community. Most commentators expressed outrage and disgust at the steps taken by the regime to further isolate Belarus and commended dignified approach by the Embassy. In a distinct shift from the reactions reported reftel, others ridiculed U.S. policies of democracy promotion and civil society support in Belarus. End summary.

Lukashenko Is "Neither Diplomat Nor Economist"

2. (U) The decision by the GOB to declare 11 diplomats personae non gratae has been greeted with extreme interest by the Belarusian public as has media speculation about possible closure of American and Belarusian Embassies. Extensive media coverage of the sequence of events has received extensive feedback on the popular internet news portals, particularly tut.by, opposition Charter97.org, Radio Liberty, and Salidarnasts. The majority of observers echoed the statement by one blogger that President Lukashenko was "neither diplomat nor economist" since he chose to "fight" with the U.S. and be "close friends" and "a frequent visitor" to third world countries, such as Vietnam. They ridiculed Lukashenko's "hollow" attempts "to lure" foreign investors into Belarus, and several suggested that his attempts at economic reform in order to integrate Belarus into the world economy and "civilized financial markets" would require rescinding corrupt "business schemes," halting his practice of "stealing" from his own people by the means of "immense bribes," hiked inflation, and "skyrocketing" gas, oil, food prices. Many bloggers expressed skepticism at calls for negotiations with the repressive regime, suggesting that Lukashenko would "go beyond the pale" and "squeeze out" as much money from the common Belarusians as possible, while disregarding the needs of pensioners, disabled persons, and children.

3. (U) Commentators on the widely-read site, tut.by, scornfully "commended" Lukashenko's diplomacy of securing Belarus' "economic and political independence" from all states except "big brother Russia" by following rules far from any established protocol. They were "offended" that while most Belarusians are "civilized and well-educated," the officials who curb their freedoms are "short-sighted and clueless." The bloggers supposed the regime is "fueling [the public's] passions" against the U.S. in order "to procrastinate the moment of its death" and expressed confidence that these misguided actions "will catch up with the regime in the end."

Americans Show No Hysteria and "Peacefully Depart"

14. (U) Many observers noted favorably the measured response of the USG to the GOB's inflammatory actions. Salidarnasc readers argued that the GOB unsuccessfully attempted to "provoke" the USG to respond "reactively" to the two "deportations" of American diplomats. Several bloggers pointed to possible negative repercussions for Belarusians, such as suspension of visa services, reduction of cultural and exchange programs, and complications for the bilateral trade relationship entailing possible losses for Belarusian companies. At the same time, observers did not identify a single negative effect on the USG. A few bloggers postulated that this event was of low political significance for the American public. One commentator equated the closure of the U.S. Embassy Minsk to a Coca-Cola booth "malfunctioning" in a remote town in Alaska, noting "it would have no effect" on U.S. foreign policy. A significant number of commentators saw the GOB declaration of American diplomats as personae non gratae as a sign of "political weakness" and "ignorance," resulting from the "unreasonable" and "blunt" approach that will probably lead to the further isolation of Belarus. Strong American diplomatic rhetoric and the USG's "mature" response prompted positive feedback and "applause of encouragement" from the Belarusian blogger community.

"No" to a U.S.-Orchestrated Color Revolution

15. (U) In a marked departure from commentary by the Belarusian public in mid-April (reftel), a number of commentators voiced their support of the GOB's strong stance in the face of USG criticism. Ardent GOB supporters showed adamant allegiance to Lukashenko's "consistent" tactics in dealings with the so-called "defiant" behavior of the U.S. Ambassador and her "servicemen" in the Embassy and in the opposition. They urged the GOB "to kick out" the

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remaining diplomats and shut down USG-sponsored NGOs and humanitarian programs. These bloggers ridiculed "the funny Americans" with their "cowboy President" promoting "one-sided" democracy, saying that these elements are not welcome in Belarus. They anticipated the "collapse" of the USG-financed local opposition, and claimed that American visa fees are used to support a large part of the "radical" and "puppet" opposition "money pot." In conclusion, one observer mixed metaphors, writing that, with no American diplomats in Belarus, the opposition would be forced to "milk" a different "pork barrel."

16. (U) Such commentators contemplated USG failures and clandestine activities in Belarus. Such observers postulated that Americans will not recognize GOB accomplishments in any sphere, whether they hold "democratic" elections or fight terrorism. According to such voices, the U.S. Embassy "serves the opposition" and is writing "a scenario" of "a colored revolution" in Belarus. Bloggers cheerfully stated Americans have not "succeeded in causing a revolution," were not able to "change the political course" of Belarus, nor would they find Lukashenko's money in foreign banks. "Ludicrous tales about political prisoners" amused the bloggers as much as the speculations about the "death squads" that "purportedly" assassinated the disappeared political opposition leaders in 1999. Bloggers concluded that the Americans should "get out of town" and even suggested that the USG unilaterally introduce "a Belarusian card" for Americans wishing to work and stay in Belarus. [Note: "A Belarusian Card" would be an analog to a recently introduced "Polish Card" ("Karta polyaka"), which entitles people of Polish descent who reside in the former USSR to certain rights and privileges of Polish citizens. End note.]

Comment

17. (SBU) Although overall the Belarusian internet community remains supportive of our actions, the appearance of voices staunchly critical of the USG marks a shift in tone of blogosphere commentary, previously the domain of more skeptical observers. While difficult to judge whether this criticism is spontaneous or manufactured, it is possible that in watching their President take a bold stance against the world's superpower, some loyalists were inspired to be

supportive. Despite international condemnation of the regime's unprecedented steps against the U.S. Embassy, the authorities will feel that their behavior is justified as long as their actions are greeted positively by even a small (or artificial) segment of society.

Comment Cont'd

18. (SBU) For our part (as will be reported septel), the Embassy is engaging actively in a series of interactions with the independent media including roundtables, print and internet video interviews, and webchats to broaden the understanding of the Belarusian public and counteract the biased material disseminated by the state media.

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